



U.S. Air Force Colonel Kelvin Townsend was assigned to Los Alamos as an Air Force Nuclear Fellow to strengthen the partnership between the Air Force and the Laboratory. (Photo: Los Alamos)

What Is an Air Force Fellow?

Employees at Los Alamos National Laboratory might have wondered about the man in the olive green flight suit walking around the National Security Sciences Building. Who is he? What is he doing? Well, I am that man—U.S. Air Force Colonel Kelvin Townsend—and I was temporarily assigned to Los Alamos for 12 months as an Air Force Nuclear Fellow. I was one of 114 participants in the Air Force Fellows program's 2012–2013 class.

The Air Force Fellows program is overseen by the Air Force Research Institute at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. The Air Force provides competitively selected Air Force officers and Air Force civilian employees with an in-depth education in national security policy. Participants spend 12 to 18 months in residence at a distinguished civilian institute, the Department of Defense, or another key government agency or department. Institutions are selected because of their prominence in security affairs and their ability to provide Fellows with a spectrum of viewpoints.

The program plays a major role in contributing ideas for enhancing national security and ensuring the continuing effectiveness of the United States Air Force. It does that through three main goals. The first goal is strategic communication—solidifying the relationship between the Air Force and the civilian academic and policy communities, as well as providing the Fellow with opportunities to deliver current Air Force strategic messages to civilian and government counterparts. Second, the program broadens and

develops senior leader competencies. Finally, Fellows evaluate national and international security policy and processes by analyzing current perspectives on defense policy and strategy issues and by reviewing technologies critical to the strategic warfare capabilities of the United States and its allies.

The specific focus of my fellowship at Los Alamos was doing research on the nuclear enterprise and looking for efficiencies and areas of improvement. I was provided with opportunities to witness activities at the three weapons laboratories and the Nevada National Security Site. I also visited Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee.

My time at Los Alamos was spent within the Weapons Program, where I served as a liaison between the Air Force and both the B61 and the W78 life-extension programs. Being in the Weapons Program provided me opportunities to interact with the weapons engineers, explosive experts, and physicists. I was able to brief Laboratory staff members on the duties of Air Force personnel and took part in many Laboratory-sponsored briefings. In addition, I hosted many visits of Air Force and other Department of Defense personnel to the Laboratory, as well as visits of LANL scientists and engineers to Air Force bases. Such visits proved invaluable for both Los Alamos and the Air Force because they gave Los Alamos staff firsthand knowledge of exactly how Los Alamos-designed weapons systems are deployed, operated, and maintained by the Air Force at these sites. Any challenges to these processes could be seen up close and possible solutions discussed, right there with the Air Force staff that would be implementing the improvements.

My fellowship confirmed my belief that a strong nuclear deterrent is achieved through resource and infrastructure investment, increased advocacy, continued nuclear competence, human capital development, and organizational reform. Resource investment is the money put into maintaining and operating the weapon systems. Infrastructure investment involves updating or replacing old and outdated support equipment and facilities. Advocacy involves stating the case for and supporting programs within the nuclear enterprise. These activities must occur within both the Department of Defense and the Department of Energy.

My time here has provided valuable insight into the role of the Department of Energy and its weapons labs in the nuclear enterprise. My next assignment is in Washington, D.C., where I will serve as chief of Nuclear Capabilities at Air Force Headquarters. The personal connections I made at Los Alamos and the lessons I learned while here will serve me well in my new position. ✦

~U. S. Air Force Colonel Kelvin Townsend